

A BEGGAR MAID

By LILY A. LONG.

When Paul Weston stepped out from his office into the snowy street on Christmas Eve he faced a procession of parcel laden people hurrying homeward with eager faces through the wind and snow. It made him realize sharply the loneliness of his own estate. He was a newcomer in Fallsburg, and his constitutional shyness had stood in the way of his making even the ordinary social acquaintances. Cottle, a man whom he knew in a business way, had asked him to come up for Christmas dinner the next day and meet his family. That was decent of Cottle, and Weston appreciated it; but somehow it didn't seem quite enough to fill the void of which he had become acutely conscious.

"It would be awfully jolly if I knew a nice girl to send a box of candy to," he mused. It struck him as a wholly original and very interesting idea.

A Salvation Army girl, who stood beside a kettle suspended from a tripod on the sidewalk, rapped sharply on her pot as Weston passed unheedingly, and he halted abruptly, as though the sound had been a personal appeal—as indeed it was intended. "Keep the pot boiling" read the placard. He fumbled confusedly in his pocket, dropped a coin among the others, and went on his way. Half way down the block he came to a florist's shop.

"I'll send some flowers to Mr. Cottle," he thought. "That will be doing something reasonable, at any rate."

The place was full of people, and for some minutes he wandered about unnoticed by the clerks, looking at the refrigerated flowers in the glass cases.

"I suppose something tolerably expensive will be the safest," he mused. "American Beauties are about the right price, I guess. Now if I were sending flowers to the Not Impossible She, supposing I had found her, I'd go about it in a different way." He reviewed the flowers with a more lively interest, and at last he stopped before a made-up bouquet of tiny pink rosebuds. This he regarded delightedly.

"That's the thing! That's the kind she would like. It's so absurdly sweet. She doesn't know what she's missing by hiding herself from me!" He was smiling at the trim little bouquet quite openly when a clerk at his elbow jerked him abruptly out of his dream by a quick

"Wanted on?"

"Yes—no. You may send that up."

"What address?"

He gave Cottle's number, and as he did so he realized that this bouquet was not at all what he had intended to send Mr. Cottle. It was for—her!

"And a dozen American Beauties," he added, hastily.

Then he thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out some loose silver. He tried again, with the same result. He felt himself growing hot as he went through his other pockets and realized that the sum total of his assets would be quite inadequate for securing title to a dozen roses on Christmas Eve.

"I thought I had a twenty dollar gold piece in that pocket," he said, with unnecessary dignity. "I'll give you a check."

"We don't take checks from strangers. Are you acquainted here?"

"No," Weston said, with doubled dignity. Then all at once he saw Cottle himself looming above the crowd. "Oh, there's a man who knows me." He explained his plight and Cottle quickly established his credit with the management. So far, so good; but Weston still felt embarrassed at his impoverished state.

"I was sure I had a double eagle in my pocket," he reflected uncomfortably as he left the place. Then suddenly the explanation flashed upon him. "Oh, thunder! That Salvation Army girl! I tossed \$20 in gold into her kettle instead of \$1 in silver! Serves me right

for putting gold and silver on the same basis in my pockets. I wonder if she got as much of a surprise out of my generosity as I did. Hello! What's up?"

A rough and ragged little newsboy darted by him, running up the street as though for dear life, and at the same moment Weston saw a policeman across the street in pursuit, his arm flung up in warning and command to the public.

He made no despicable figure at running, despite his bulk, but the newsboy had eaten fewer square meals in his life and would easily have distanced his pursuer but that a good citizen, zealous to see the law supported in some directions at least, dropped a hand on the boy's collar and held him, in spite of his wriggling, until the officer came up and took him in charge.

"What's the kid done?"

"Stashed the money out of the Salvation Army Christmas kettle up there. I'll show you, sonny!"



"Is This the Kid?" Demanded the Officer.

Weston caught the word, and when the policeman, looking like a very large man-of-war escorting a very small filibuster, marched his prisoner back to the corner where the Salvation Army kettle stood beside her tripod Weston followed. He felt that he had a financial interest in the matter in controversy.

"Is this the kid?" demanded the officer, thrusting the boy before him into the full blaze of the gas lamp.

"I—I—I—it was so sudden," the girl hesitated.

"All you got to do is to identify him. I didn't see him snatch, but I seen him running away all right."

"I never did," gasped the boy, twisting his neck to stare into the face of his captor. "I never."

"You seen him, didn't you?" urged the officer. "This was the boy, wasn't it?"

"I never did," the boy reiterated. He was not crying, but his face was twisted with soundless terror that was like the terror of a defenceless animal caught in a trap.

"What made you cut out like that, then?"

"I wasn't doin' nuthin'. I didn't want to get pinched."

The officer shook the boy by the collar. It was more a gesture of impatience than anything else, but the victim was so thin that his arms and legs rattled disjointedly as his equilibrium was upset.

"Oh, don't!" the girl cried out.

"Can't you say if he is the kid?" the officer asked, his impatience turning upon her.

"He isn't," she said, quickly. "He was bigger—quite a good deal bigger. And he ran down that street!" She waved her hand somewhat indefinitely in the opposite direction to that the boy had taken.

"Too bad you couldn't talk before,"

the officer said, drily. "What's your name?"

The girl was looking so intently at the boy that she did not heed his question until he asked her again, and sharply.

"Katie Lane," she said, with startled haste.

"What address?"

"1265 Laford street."

The policeman bent down and ran his hand over the boy's clothes. As he straightened up, with an effort, after his unsuccessful search the boy stood free for a moment and instantly he was off like a shot. The policeman made an automatic plunge after him and then pulled up.

"I know where to find him if I want him, all right," he said. "I won't be far away, Miss, but I'll be out of sight in case they try it on again. If you need me you just rap hard on the pot there and I'll hear you."

Weston had lingered, at first out of curiosity and then because the girl's

voice held him bound. He was peculiarly sensitive to voices, and her's had a quality that pierced him like magic. Her face (or as much of it as he could see within the "scoop" bonnet of the Army) was nice enough, but any woman's face would look sweet within that demure frame. It was her voice, not her face, that held him like a spell. Quite apart from the words she said it seemed to be a call to something mysterious and unknown within himself that made him forgetful of time and space. Now, when the officer glanced inquiringly at him, he became suddenly aware of himself and moved to depart, but the girl checked him with a low spoken word.

"Wait."

The policeman still lingered. "How long will you be here, sis?"

"Major Herriott is to take my place in half an hour."

"All right. I know him. And I'll get the right boy yet." He departed and the girl turned swiftly to Weston.

"It was all because of that gold piece you put in," she said excitedly.

"I'm sorry. I—really I had no intention"—said Weston, with more truth than explicitness.

"No one could expect a street boy to resist an overwhelming temptation like that when grown people steal whole railroads and things."

"I'm not expecting him to. Don't blame me," Weston said. He knew it was idiotic, but her voice made him so happy that he couldn't help being foolish. Then he tried to recover himself. Anyhow, since the boy who took it got safely away—

She said nothing, but somehow across the silence her thought flashed to him and he checked a whistle.

"I see. It was the boy. And you let him off."

"He was such a wretched little

scrap of a thing. And it was Christmas eve."

"There at least no one can challenge your statement."

"You are making fun of me!"

"Not the least in the world. I am more interested than I can tell you."

"Well, then, what shall we do?"

There seemed to be, if that were possible, a trace of impatience in her thrilling voice.

"Do? We've been done! I mean, it's what the diplomats call a closed incident, isn't it?"

She laughed—a light hearted, happy laugh that gave him exactly the same feeling that a certain sort of little pink rosebuds always did. It made him think of the bouquet he had sent Mrs. Cottle.

"Not altogether. That is what I wanted to say—the reason I asked you to wait. That money!"

"Yes," he said encouragingly, as she hesitated.

"It belonged to the army."

"Yes," he chuckled.

"Why do you laugh?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Merely at something I thought of—something that happened to me a while ago," he said hastily. "Go on. That money, you were saying, belonged to the army?"

"And I lost it for them."

"Through refusing the identity of the boy, I see. Yes, I suppose you are an accomplice after the fact to that extent."

"It was partly your fault," she flashed. "You have no right to laugh. You put the temptation there."

"I haven't forgotten—yet. Do you think that as a consequence I am morally bound to make restitution?"

"I am. And since you began it, you might help me without making me feel worse than I do about it."

"My dear young lady, I would do anything in the world to save you from feeling unhappy over it."

"Will you lend me twenty dollars?"

"I am honored."

"A gold piece, please."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't another. Won't a check do?"

"I suppose it will have to. Please make it payable to bearer."

"I'd rather make it payable to you."

She shook her meek bonnet in a way that was far from meek. "No, please not."

"As you will," he conceded, hastily, fearful that she would withdraw her request if he made difficulties. He rested his check book against her tripod and filled in a blank with his fountain pen.

"Thank you," she said. And then, as though casually remembering a detail, she asked, "Where can I send the money to repay you?"

"Won't you let me substitute this check for the original contribution which was lost in transit?"

She held the scrap of paper toward him and turned her head away, with the air of one dismissing an importunate beggar. "Of course, if you take that tone I can't accept it at all."

"Have it just as you like. I'll call some time for the money."

"Then I don't," he said promptly.

"Call? Where?"

"Twelve sixty-five Laford street. Forgive me—I couldn't help hearing."

"I prefer you should not call," she said coldly. "I'll send it to your bank."

"But I should very much like to call," he urged eagerly. There was something in his voice that surprised himself. Perhaps it surprised the girl, for she turned toward him with an attentive and questioning air.

"Why?" she asked tersely.

"Because—I don't want this to be the last"—he stammered.

"Is it your idea that we could be friends?" she asked bluntly.

"Why not?"

She touched her uniform. "I should think it would be quite obvious why not. You are a gentleman."

"Oh, but"—he protested, vaguely.

"And your visits could neither be flattering nor gratifying to—a servant girl."

It seemed to Weston that she was denying him the one thing in the world that he cared for. All his life he had been seeking for something, and now that he had just caught a glimpse of it she was shutting the door in his face.

"But I can't let you go like this," he urged, incoherently. "I—I can't!"

"I really wasn't considering your side of the question," she said, drily. "But if it comes to that I am afraid you will simply have to."

"Oh! You mean you don't care to know me?"

"Incredible as it may seem," she let fall.

"Of course, I did not mean to force myself upon you," he said, with a hurt in his voice.

She looked at him keenly, appraisingly, forgivingly. He felt rather than saw that the rim of her bonnet hid a smile. But she did not relent. "Good-bye," she said, and turned away to rap vigorously upon her kettle as a group approached.

Weston went his way with a curious feeling that something tremendous had happened. Was it conceivable that he was not to see her again? He tried to shake himself back into his normal groove by asking if it were conceivable that not seeing her again made any real difference. Why, he had scarcely seen her face clearly enough to be sure of recognizing her at sight.

He demanded scornfully whether he was falling in love with a voice and nothing more, and he told himself vehemently that he was a fool if he did not recognize that the voice revealed the inner nature.

He asked coldly if he was going to encourage himself to lose his head over a superior servant girl, and he told himself with an air that class distinctions were artificial and that it was the test of a man to recognize true worth wherever found. He admitted this as an abstract proposition, and asked himself with good humor, whether he thought he was big enough to "down" the conventions of the world, artificial though they were.

Suppose, he said to himself in answer to that, that this was the Real Thing—the one glimpse of the Grail vouch-

safed to every man as a test of the singleness of his inner vision. The test comes to different men in different ways and at different times. The question is, can he judge the fact simply from his own nature, or will he let the world, which demands all and gives nothing, judge his needs for him? This was the Grail for him. He had wandered too long athirst to doubt when the water sparkled at his lip. He would claim his own!

The Christmas sunlight on the snow the next day was so brilliant that the city seemed dressed for a pageant. Weston was still uplifted with the exaltation of the night before, and he looked abroad and boldly claimed the sunshine as an omen. So should it be.

He hunted the florist's shop through until he found the rosebuds of the sort that pleased him—little joyous buds, like her laugh. He filled a basket with them and took his way to Laford street. And tucked in among the flowers was a note. He had written it from the words that were singing in his brain when he awoke that morning. It hardly seemed his own.

A stout woman opened the door at No. 1,265—a woman with a large, good natured face, sleeves rolled above the elbow and with patches of flour that showed the Christmas baking to be still under way, dabbled on her arms and on her dishevelled black hair.

"Does Miss Katie Lane live here?"

"Sure she does," the woman answered, genially.

"Will you give her these flowers, please?" he faltered.

"Now, that's kind of you, and Katie will be that pleased. I'd ask you to step in, but Katie's sick abed the day with the cold she took over that Salvation Army collection, and the other children—I've nine of them altogether—have got the house turned upside down entirely. There's a deal of influenza about, and her standing on the street corners day and night, and then to miss the dinner today after all! But she'll like the flowers, that she will, and thank you heartily? What name shall I say, sor?"

"There's a note among the flowers," he stammered, and fled.

Yes, the note was among the flowers, and the vision of the night, he told himself fiercely, had not fled. It seemed to waver that was the weakness of the moment. It would be clear when he heard her voice again—it must. It must! He argued the point so hotly that he was almost late in keeping his engagement at Cottle's.

Cottle welcomed him heartily and presented him to Mrs. Cottle, a lady whose cheery manner was really not so very different from Mrs. Lane's, and to his sister-in-law, Miss Archer, a thin young woman who shivered near the open fire and who barely acknowledged the introduction by a frosty bow. She evidently did not share her brother-in-law's philanthropic impulses toward casual strangers.

"If I had known last night, Weston, that your extravagance was addressed in this direction," Cottle said jovially, "I should have thought twice before aiding and abetting you. Did I tell you, Ellen, that if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have had those roses?"

"Thank you so much, Mr. Weston," said Mrs. Cottle. "It was just lovely of you. I hope we divided the flowers as you intended. I claimed the roses, you see, and my sister—why, Bess, where's your bouquet?"

"I thought it would make a good centerpiece for the table," said the chilly young woman by the fire. Her voice—and poor Weston was sensitive to voices!—was hoarse and muffled. He had a hysterical desire to laugh at the idea that the symbolical bouquet should have come into the hands of this forbidding young person. Ah, well, the basket had gone straight, and was as glad, glad! Suddenly he felt strong to defy them all, though he should stand forever an outcast from the world. He could even be gay of speech in his new freedom.

"Like the hero of romance who is always improvidently throwing his purse to the beggar—I had hung my broad gold piece into the Salvation Army pot on the street corner," he said. "Only in my case it was worse than improvident; it was unintentional. That's how I found myself in the embarrassed financial condition from which Mr. Cottle kindly rescued me."

"Those Salvation kettles should not be allowed on the street," said Cottle, aggressively. "It's plain begging. It is demoralizing."

Mrs. Cottle turned the current of the impending monologue by asking her sister:

"Is Katie Lane still interested in the Salvation Army work?"

Weston's heart gave such a leap at the name that he wondered if they heard it.

"Yes, I believe she is," Miss Archer answered indifferently.

"She was our second girl," Mrs. Cottle explained to Weston. "A very superior girl, with pretty manners and a gentle, soft voice. I thought she had a nice voice for a servant, didn't you, Bess?"

"Oh, yes, for a servant," Miss Archer answered with a supercilious air.

Weston raged inwardly. The insolence of it! She had the voice and the heart of an angel! Who were these women to sit in judgment.

A maid appeared at the door. "There's a policeman in the hall would like to speak to Mr. Cottle," she said in awestruck tones.

With an air of dignified surprise Cottle went out. They heard him take the visitor into the library.

"Yes, 'Katie was a good girl and very warm hearted,'" Mrs. Cottle went on, though she was obviously more intent on the murmured conversation across the hall than on her own. "She was always wanting to help the poor people she knew. That's why she took up the Sal—What does he want, Horace?"

Cottle stood in the doorway. Weston had never seen him look bewildered before and he felt that the occasion must be momentous. Cottle turned his dismayed look from his wife to Miss Archer.

"Bess, will you come here?"

Bess did not stir. She was staring back at her brother-in-law with a look as paralyzed as his own.

"What is it, Horace?" Mrs. Cottle repeated.

"That man—the police officer—wants to see Bess. It is something about Katie Lane," he said slowly.

Miss Archer sprang from her low chair by the fire and went swiftly to the door. Then she turned and looked directly at Weston, at whom until that moment she had hardly glanced.

"Come," she said imperiously.

And Weston, his nerves tingling with knowledge that had not yet reached his brain, followed her into the library. So did Cottle, and so, of course did Mrs. Cottle.

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The Big Policeman Looked Down at Her With Curiosity and Interest.

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